

10 TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTING A DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM

Alan G. Chute, Managing Partner and Herbert L. Bivens, senior performance technologist, of Lucent (previously AT&T) Technologies' Center for Excellence in Distance Learning, spoke to Technology for Learning Newsletter on ways training departments can ease the transition from classroom-based instruction to distance learning.

In today's hectic environment, distance learning is widely recognized as a viable training alternative for corporations, universities, and the medical community. It provides the ability to deliver more training to more people with higher impact, and in a more cost-effective way.

Successful distance learning implementation of interactive video distance learning requires innovative technology, but also the creative energy of human instructors. Here are 10 ways to make the transition smoother:

1. Look to distance learning as a way to revitalize and innovate your existing training program. Distance learning technology allows you to explore new visual and audio media to enhance learning. For example, multimedia and the World Wide Web can be easily incorporated to stimulate and reinforce your learning goals.
2. Start using a multi-level evaluations approach. (e.g., student satisfaction, learning transfer, improved job performance, financial impact). Multi-level evaluation is a fundamental part of distance learning. In addition to examining how employees react to the program, evaluate how the distance learning program is impacting actual job performance, through follow-up surveys, etc.
3. Keep the technology transparent. Discussions at the end of a distance learning program should center around course content rather than the technology used for delivery. Make sure the participants are comfortable with the technology early in the program so they can concentrate on the learning process.
4. Market your distance learning program internally and externally. Tell people within your business unit about the achievements you've made with distance learning, then spread the news to other business units via internal newsletters, word-of-mouth, or other communication vehicles.
5. Determine your needs up front. Before implementation begins, set up a cross-functional team made up of trainers, instructional designers, telecommunications staff, and end-users. Identify in advance any concerns or needs related to the training process or technology and resolve them prior to delivering the first distance learning program.
6. Use on-site coordination. Provide an on-site coordinator at each remote location. The remote coordinator should be skilled in using the technology and setting up advance testing of all equipment. Other responsibilities can include distribution of course materials, greeting participants as they arrive and providing a contact number in case any problems occur.
7. Obtain local field manager commitment. Prior to delivering distance learning programs to remote sites, get commitment from the local field manager and the on-site coordinator that the room will be reserved for the length of the session. Also, make sure the participants will not be interrupted by their regular job responsibilities during the training program.
8. Make sure instructors are well-trained. Provide thorough training for instructors in distance learning presentation skills. Take advantage of training workshops. As instructors become experienced, they will be able to assist new trainers with their distance delivery.

9. Design programs for distance learning. Plan carefully when designing a distance learning program. A good balance of human interaction and use of the technical "props" will enhance the learning experience. Charts, graphics, role-playing, case studies, brainstorming, and question and answer sessions stimulate the learning process and encourage better participation and learning recall.

10. Use reliable equipment and attend distance learning seminars. Dependable equipment ensures the most successful distance learning experience, so be sure to purchase your technology from an established vendor.

Universities across the country offer workshops and seminars for trainers interested in learning more about distance learning. Seminars include a variety of experts, both in person and via videoconferencing, who discuss the benefits of distance learning and how to implement it. For information on seminars near you, call 800-590-CEDL or access the Center for Excellence in Distance Learning's web site at <http://www.lucent.com/cedl>.

Published in Training & Technology Perspectives, Ideas from experts on how emerging technologies are influencing adult learning , March 1996 edition.